Rabbi Korff: Doughty Backer of Nixon

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Rabbi Baruch Korff with President Nixon at rally last month.

By Morton Kondracke
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President Nixon might have preferred having his old friend, Donald Kendall of Pepsi Cola, lead a national campaign of the faithful in his defense. Instead he got a doughty retired rabbi from Rehoboth, Mass., who is doing a much better job.

In classic corporate style, Kendall got a letterhead full of national notables together—including comedian Bob Hope, the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, Mamie Eisenhower and industrialist David Packard—and founded Americans for the Presidency.

Kendall's group placed ads in 145 newspapers, raising $200,000. From larger individual contributors whose names it will not disclose, it got another $150,000. It has opened an office in the high-rent district of Washington, hired the former congressional relations director of the Cost of Living Council, and put together a new ad campaign to be mounted in the near future.

Rabbi Baruch Korff, on the other hand, began with $1,200 he had saved for a vacation, took out a bank loan of $3,000, got a friend to contribute $2,000, and bought an ad in one newspaper, The New York Times.

He opened a $100-a-month office in Providence, R.I., and founded a group called the National Citizens Committee for Fairness to the Presidency, whose letterhead contains names no more notable than actress Anne Baxter, Mrs. Herbert Stein, wife of the chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, and Maj. Gen. Julius Klein of Chicago.

From the committee's modest beginnings last summer, a pro-Nixon movement has blossomed that now includes 233 supporting groups containing, Rabbi Korff estimated, 2,300,000 members growing at the rate of 25,000 to 30,000 per week.

The Kendall organization, by comparison, has gathered some 35,000 supporters, according to its field director, Robert E. Bradford.

The White House's official liaison man for "supporting groups" on the im-

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peachment question, Bruce Herschensohn, said Korff's is the largest and most effective of them all and that he has had little contact with Kendall's.

Although Herschensohn said that he spends "about eight hours a day, or half my time" on supporting groups, both the White House and Korff vehemently deny that the Korff committee's activities are programmed by the President's staff.

The Korff committee has sponsored two Washington rallies attended by Mr. Nixon, and is planning a third on July 18 around the theme "Target 38"—the 38 referring to the members of the House Judiciary Committee considering President Nixon's impeachment.

Korff estimated that total contributions to his committee so far amount to $1 million. In contrast to Bradford, he volunteered to allow a reporter to examine the group's contributor list.

When the committee's treasurer was reluctant to part with the information that Teamsters union President Frank E. Fitzsimmons was the group's largest contributor — at $25,000 — Korff said he saw to it that the information was put out.

He also volunteered that insurance tycoon W. Clement Stone has contributed $3,000, and that the Republican National Committee is dunning the organization for $4,855 that it spent mailing out letters to heads of households in the districts of members of the Judiciary Committee.

In appearance, the Washington headquarters of Korff's committee are reminiscent of nothing so much as the dingy digs of the late campaign organization of Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.).

In a narrow old building with a matchbox-sized elevator, the office is paper-strewn and apparently furnished from a second-hand store.

Korff is nearing 60, but looks older. He speaks deliberately and gently in a Ukranian accent, sprinkling his conversation with quotations from the Torah and from Jewish folksayings. It is not hard to imagine him counselling a youth approaching his bar mitzvah or a couple about to embark on the adventure of marriage.

Even though he has had extensive interviews lately, with the President and Vice President of the United States, he said that he would rather be back at his religious duties than involved in politics.

"I don't know if I even like politicians," he said. "So many of them go for the jugular and lose sight of the real virtues of man. They forget that "there is not a righteous man who does not know sin or a sinner who does not have some redeeming features."

There is a marked contrast between Korff's gentle conversation and his pro-Nixon campaign rhetoric. The latter tends to be harsh: his opposition is "the rankest consortium of saboteurs." History will judge the media "for what they are—assassins." Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, who gave the Pentagon Papers to the press, is a "thief," a "spy" and a "traitor."

The Rev. Robert Drinan, an anti-Nixon member of

the Judiciary Committee, is "a mad monk, like Rasputin."

A friend who does not share Korff's politics, Rabbi Nathan Rosen of Providence, R.I., said Korff "is a very gentle and compassionate man."

At the same time, Rosen said, "He is a very unusual personality. He espouses minority causes that other people seem to neglect. He gives himself to causes, and nothing will stop him from a cause that he wants to pursue."

In tracing his personal history, Korff said that "a man is born as an infant, a man is responsible for his own creation, but the conditions in which he lives help shape him. Mine was shaped by bloodshed and terror."

He refers to the death of his mother in a Russian pogrom, and his destiny, at the age of 23, was to negotiate with the Nazi government "to buy Jews at $25 or $26 a head."

An adviser to the War Refuge Board, "I had to plead with President Roose- Finally I got them through to Turkey and appealed to the man who became Pope John XXIII to make them Christians in order to save their lives."

After the war, Korff said, "I worked with Menachem Begin (now a member of the Israeli parliament) and aided the Stern group and the Irgun in smuggling arms

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and refugees" into Palestine.

He acknowledged, in interviews now, that the Irgun Zvai Leumi and Stern gang were terrorists, and he does not approve of the deaths they caused, but said: "After all, the United States was not handed its freedom on a silver platter, either."

Korff would not stand for a comparison to be drawn between his aiding terrorists in a cause in which he believed—the birth of Israel—and Dr. Ellsberg's engaging in "theft" in the cause which he claims he was serving—salvation of democracy in the United States.

"You cannot remotely equate that cause with the other cause," he said. "The Irgun—this was to salvage the remnants of genocide, to atone for the iniquity of the whole world and rebuild a nation.

"How can you remotely equate this to Ellsberg? Here's an individual who did more to further American involvement in Vietnam than many of his peers. Let's suppose he had a change of heart. Do you turn traitor? Do you become a spy? You can have a change of heart without perfidy, without theft. You cannot equate the birth of a nation with an Ellsberg."

In his current cause, Korff said that it is the presidency that he is trying to preserve, not merely Mr. Nixon.

"Those whose hatred we are trying to counteract not only wish to destroy Richard Nixon," he said, "but the presidency. Richard Nixon is a link in the chain of the presidency, and when you weaken that link, you will destroy the chain."

Mr. Nixon, he said, is the victim of a "vendetta" by the press and, perhaps, of a conspiracy by "the unknown element of the CIA."

Now, he said, Mr. Nixon is being judged by a group—the Judiciary Committee—that is stacked against him.

" 'Who shall ascend to the mountain of the Lord, who shall sit in His holy place—he who has a clean hand and a pure heart,' " said the rabbi.

That standard, he said, Judiciary Chairman Rep. Peter W. Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.) does not meet, by virture of having received campaign contributions from "the archdeacon of impeachment, George Meany," president of the AFL-CIO.

In July, Korff said, his committee's rally, "will focus on the malignancy in the House Judiciary Committee," meaning the mmebers who, he said, have declared themselves in favor of impeachment.

"Those who have not been affected should quarantine the malignancy," he said, meaning that the purpose of the rally will be to cause undecided committee members to force the seven who have declared their position to disqualify themselves.